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DEMOCRACY AND THE RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE CONTEXT
OF NORTH AFRICA AND EGYPT

Core Course Essay

Patrick Duddy, Class of '94

The Geostrategic Context

Seminar L

Faculty: Amb. Joseph/ MrStafford

Advisor: Mr. Courney

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Recent threats against Westerners by Islamic militants in Egypt coupled with bloody attacks against foreigners by militants in Algeria and the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York have chillingly reminded U.S. policymakers that the phenomenon many in the West call Islamic fundamentalism has increasingly assumed a xenophobic and, even more problematically, an anti-American cast. Fifteen years ago such threats and attacks would certainly have been cause for concern, but would probably not have been viewed as symptomatic of a major foreign policy challenge across the entire region.¹ Today, that has changed. Across North Africa and throughout the Muslim world there is evidence that what is known variously as Islamic fundamentalism or Islamic revivalism or simply Islamism is an important political force. Just as significantly, fundamentalism has become synonymous with the advocacy of radical change and of confrontation with the West. Anti-Israeli sentiment also figures prominently in the list of issues with which the fundamentalists stake their claims on the North African and Middle Eastern public's attention, but is just one of their grievances and not the chief one they hold against their own governments. Consequently, neither the United States nor other Western nations can assume that the anti-Western character of Islamic revivalism is likely to be satisfactorily addressed only by advances in the Arab-Israeli peace process, although the news out of Egypt suggests that the peace process will be certainly affected by the success or failure of fundamentalism in Israel's powerful neighbor.

¹ It seems to me that while the advent of a fundamentalist regime in Iran was understood to have regional implications, it was not then clear that fundamentalism per se represented a regional challenge.

The advent of Islamic fundamentalism as a formidable socio-political element in the Middle East and North Africa has posed a number of urgent questions for the U.S. and brought a number of longstanding elements of U.S. policy toward the region into conflict. First, the questions: is fundamentalism a single monolithic movement or a series of similar but independent local phenomena; is fundamentalism anti-democratic and anti-western by definition; is popular support for fundamentalism strong enough to precipitate radical change in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East; and, finally, how would the triumph of the fundamentalists in one or more of the countries of that region affect U.S. interests?

The answers to these questions, predictably, are not clear. While Patrick Buchanan, Charles Krauthammer and other prominent observers have warned of the danger a successful "fundamentalist international" could pose to U.S. interests and the prospects for peace in the region, John L. Esposito, author of *The Islamist Threat: Myth or Reality*, emphasizes that the failure of earlier efforts to promote pan-Arabism suggests that these fears are ill-founded.² As for the question of the anti-western character of Islamic fundamentalist groups, on the one hand, virtually all observers of middle eastern politics note that the war against Iraq clearly provided an important stimulus and that fundamentalist membership seemed to surge after 1991. On the other hand, the scarce public opinion data available from the region suggests that there is an important sector in many of the countries of the region anxious to see greater democratization. Perhaps more importantly, most observers suggest that the rise of fundamentalism is due largely to popular frustration with the failure of the current secular regimes to provide for basic needs. Virtually all of the non-Shi'ia Muslim countries in which fundamentalism has made significant inroads are struggling with weak economies, population pressures and endemic corruption. This,

² John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (New York, 1992), p. 187.

in turn, leads to the supposition that, given the opportunity, some at least of the governments in the region would be changed if full political participation were permitted Islamist groups. It seems clear that this, as much as the threat of violence, accounts for the determination of so many regimes to suppress their Islamic opposition. The question of whether new Islamic governments would be hostile to U.S. interests is a complicated issue and may require as many answers as there are countries. . Clearly, Iran and, more recently, the Sudan provide evidence that the fundamentalist impulse can give rise to abiding official hostility toward the U.S. and the rest of the West.

The problematical policy implications posed by the rise of fundamentalism in states such as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia et al stem, in part , from the fact that for many years the U.S. has valued (or at least, settled for) relative stability over democratization in the Arab Middle East. We have accepted effective control over the body politic as legitimizing the government in power and allowed Arab suspicion of the Western liberal tradition to inhibit our support for more acceptable standards of governance. In essence, we have allowed our interest in advancing other regional foreign policy priorities to eclipse our interest in democracy. There have been good and sufficient reasons for this. This was particularly true during the cold war. Moreover, the countries of the region did not appear to have the requisite civil institutions to support democracy. Western secularism seemed at odds with Islamic social customs and law (Shari'a) and U.S. support for democracy seemed likely to make advances on more urgent security issues too difficult.

The top two priorities on our Middle Eastern agenda have long remained unchanged. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Edward P. Djerejian expressed them clearly in a speech delivered at The Meridian House in Washington, D.C. in

June of 1992. While noting the scope and pace of change elsewhere in the world and acknowledging the pressure for change in the Near East, Djerejian stressed that :

Amidst these changes, basic U.S. foreign policy objectives remain consistent and clear. Two pillars stand out. First, we seek a just, lasting and comprehensive peace between Israel and all her neighbors, including the Palestinians; and second, we seek viable security arrangements, which will assure stability and unimpeded commercial access to the vast oil reserves of the Arabia Peninsula and Persian Gulf. ³

Neither the appearance of fundamentalist movements in the countries which surround Israel nor instability in the region nor the defeat of Iraq by the U.S.-led UN coalition has changed our basic objectives. This is not surprising. Basic interests do not change rapidly or often. Nevertheless, developments over the last several years, particularly in North Africa, should compel us to rethink our strategy for addressing our interests. Oil and Israel are as important to us as ever, but things are happening around that region which cannot be ignored.

Both of our top foreign policy objectives require the presence throughout the region of responsible, stable governments. In Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, fundamentalist groups have manifested a strength that clearly threatens the present regimes. In all three countries the Islamists have called for greater democratization; in none has the sitting government been willing to risk ceding power. The United States has seemed perplexed and unsure of how to proceed. Frustrated by on-again off-again access to the political process and frequently repressed, some fundamentalist groups have turned to violence which in turn threatens to make countries like Egypt and Algeria ungovernable except as police states. Neither chaos nor the advent of anti-Western, anti-U.S. regimes in North Africa or elsewhere in the region is in the U.S. interest. The

³ Assistant Secretary Djerejian delivered this speech on June 2, 1992. The speech was widely reported in the media. Its basic points were restated in a variety of subsequent speeches and articles given during 1992 and 1993.

stable Arab governments on which our policies have depended so heavily no longer appear to have so sure a grip on power as previously. Worse, to counter rising fundamentalism, they have frequently resorted to unambiguously repressive measures. Thus, we are faced with a dilemma. Do we stand with our "friends" in the region against our own principles and those who appear to have broad popular support and who are asking for democratic reforms? We have seen throughout the world that repression is not sustainable indefinitely and know that the consequences for seeming complicitous in the abuses of an authoritarian regime can poison bilateral relations for years to come. Still, as Professor John L. Esposito has pointed out, "Talk of democratization troubles both autocratic rulers in the Muslim world and many Western governments... The former fear any opposition, let alone one that cloaks itself in values that Western governments officially cherish and preach. For leaders of the West, democracy raises the prospect of old reliable friends or client states being transformed into more independent and less reliable nations."⁴

To date, the U.S. has walked a narrow line. Our reaction to events in Algeria illustrates just how ambivalent our public position has been. In January of 1992, the ruling party and the military "halted the nation's first democratic elections and blocked fundamentalists from capturing a majority in the Parliament."⁵ The State Department's first public reaction was to downplay the significance of the Algerian government's move, suggesting that the government was acting constitutionally. The following day the spokesperson, Assistant Secretary Margaret Tutwiler, changed her position, acknowledging that the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had protested the constitutionality of the government's move. Tutwiler told the media, "Our position is going to be that we are not going to interject ourselves in that debate, we are not

⁴ John L. Esposito as quoted by Timothy Sisk in *Islam and Democracy* (United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington, D.C., 1992), p. 11.

⁵ Mary Curtis, *The Boston Globe*, January 15, 1992, p. 12.

going to take sides on whether they are indeed operating within their constitution, or, as the opposition claims, they are not.”⁶

Prior to the Algerian government's move to annul the election results and repress the FIS, the party, which was only one of many Islamic political parties, had not advocated violence. The GOA's actions clearly radicalized the FIS. As we know, since January 1992, the group has adopted political violence and has targeted foreigners among others. Public pronouncements by U.S. policymakers have done little to reassure democratically -inclined Algerians, to dissuade the FIS from violence or to encourage the GOA to compromise. On the contrary, officials such as former Assistant Secretary Djerejian have made it clear that the U.S. doubts the democratic vocation of the religious parties and warned that the U.S. could not support the principle of “one man, one vote, one time.”

“One man, one vote, one time:” The vision of Islamic fundamentalist parties coming to power fully legitimized by victories at the ballot box is one which haunts U.S. policymakers. Moreover, because support for Islamic parties is increasingly evident throughout the countries of the Magreb as well as in Egypt, Syria and elsewhere in the Muslim world, it is a vision which does not seem entirely farfetched. Indeed, one prominent editorialist has recently suggested that Egypt “might fall under the control of the Islamic fundamentalists” and speculated on what this would mean: “Egypt has no more people than Iran or Turkey...But it is the cultural center of the entire Arab Middle East ...if Egypt goes, a wave of copycat Islamic revolutions is likely to sweep the region...”⁷ If the “fall” of Egypt does not seem immediately likely, at a minimum, it no longer seems impossible and such an eventuality would certainly have serious

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Gwynne Dyer, “Islamic Fundamentalism's Next Victim?” *Baltimore Sun*, August 8, 1993.

consequences for the region. . Nevertheless, as serious as that prospect may be, the most immediate danger may be that disparate groups of Islamic activists will be hopelessly radicalized by the failure of undemocratic secular regimes to permit them to participate in the political lives of their countries. An expanding cycle of violence will inevitably seriously weaken the governments and eventually fracture the already weakened economies of countries like Algeria and Egypt. Already, according to news reports, Egyptian authorities say political violence has cost Egypt 900 million dollars in income from tourism and this figure was reported in the media before the recent warnings to foreigners to stay out of the country. The danger to the U.S. certainly is that these governments will fall to radicalized political forces which will see the U.S. as having contributed to their long suppression. Given the Islamists professed interest in democracy, this need not happen. On the other hand, as Augustus Richard Norton has noted, " So long as the Islamic movements are given no voice in politics, there can be no surprise that their rhetoric is shrill and their stance uncompromising."⁸

Policy Options: Because neither the implosion of the Arab countries of North Africa now wrestling with an up-surge of Islamic fundamentalism nor their domination by radicalized anti-western fundamentalists would be in our interest and either seems possible in the mid-term if not the immediate future, I believe the U.S. must develop a new approach for dealing with the region. Two possibilities immediately suggest themselves. The first would focus on political Islam and has been cogently advanced by Robin Wright in a long piece published in the *Los Angeles Times* last summer.

Wright argues that the U.S. has been "disengaged" from events unfolding in the

⁸ Augustus Richard Norton, Inclusion Can Deflate Islamic Populism," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Volume 10, No.3, Summer 1993, p.51.

Muslim world and that we need to recognize that "Islam is the most energetic and dynamic political idiom in the Mideast and beyond..."⁹ Wright says, in a word, that we need a foreign policy to deal with Islam per se. Such a policy would seek to defuse Islamic extremism through engagement. Wright says that "the policy goal must be not only to allow but actively encourage Islamists to come to power by democratic means and to experiment with ways that blend political pluralism and Islam."¹⁰ She recommends that the U.S. reduce its dependence on foreign oil and thus recover its capacity to decouple its interests from those of undemocratic regimes like Saudi Arabia. She further suggests the U.S. "cut off access to the arms, intelligence data and training programs that facilitate repression by undemocratic regimes." The weakness in her position is that it does not address the crucial point that under current circumstances, Islamic parties are unlikely to come to power democratically, at least not in North Africa, and restricting relations with the governments of countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia is a practical impossibility at this time. Furthermore, her program fails to consider what the advent of Islamic governments throughout the region would mean for the Israeli-Arab peace process. Would the new governments respect agreements negotiated by regimes Islamists considered illegitimate? It seems doubtful.

An alternative to a strategy focusing on Islam would be a strategy based on intensified support for the development of democratic institutions and the expansion

⁹ Robin Wright, "U.S. Needs Foreign Policy on Islam," *Los Angeles Times*, July 7, 1993.

¹⁰ Ibid.

(enlargement) of popular participation. Such an approach would seek to convince sitting governments to recognize that the only practical course for authoritarian regimes is to seek to legitimize themselves at home and abroad by becoming more democratic. This would mean convincing governments like Egypt's to do more to assure the participation of fundamentalists in the political process, to support a more independent judiciary, to protect genuine press freedom and to contemplate the possibility of free and fair elections at some point in the foreseeable future. The world now offers a plethora of fresh examples of countries which have succeeded in incorporating democratic reforms without disintegrating into chaos and civil war or lapsing back into extreme authoritarianism. There are also many examples of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes which have disintegrated when they tried to sustain themselves in power in the face of broadly based popular opposition. We need to make sure that the governments of the region are intimately aware of the lessons others have learned. Our efforts in Egypt should serve as our cornerstone program in the region. The USG is already working closely with the government of Egypt in the context of one of our largest assistance programs. This should provide us with the leverage and the opportunity to convince the Egyptian leadership that its own long term interests are best served by opting for managed democratic change. Promoting democracy in Egypt would do much to make real democracy appear a more viable alternative in other countries of the region. By focusing on the government,

moreover, rather than essentially abandoning it, as Wright's model effectively suggests, we could continue to advance our other priority objectives, including our interest in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Fundamental to the success of a policy for democracy in North Africa will be our willingness to make clear what we stand for. Heretofore, our reticence on the subject has seemed far more noteworthy than any successes our low-key lobbying for pluralism may have yielded. Worse yet, feckless refusals to recognize plain facts such as we exhibited after the government of Algeria thwarted the apparently legitimate election victory of the FIS make the U.S. look cynical and uninterested in substantive progress in the region. We appear to be part of the problem. To redress this tendency we need to employ both our conventional diplomacy and our public diplomacy resources more aggressively than our recent reticence has permitted. In former Assistant Secretary Djerejian's speech, quoted above, democracy was scarcely mentioned. The language of the State Department's new "Democratization Strategy for the Near East" is less equivocal than past documents and less inclined to limit itself to what we are against. What it lacks is a consideration of incentives for countries in the region to democratize. This is an important shortcoming, but not insurmountable. We need to work out what we can do to reward progress, discourage backsliding and censure intransigence in ways that will not limit our

communication to the region to carping on a single theme. In the meantime, what we know about democracy is that, paradoxically, its capacity to accomodate change yields stability. Stability is in our interest and in the interest of our Arab partners in North Africa and the Mideast. This is a message we somehow must communicate unmistakably.